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WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT?
OBLIGATION, CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL WELFARE

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Abstract:

This article explores the ways that responsibility for social welfare and well-being is framed by service providers, activists and the state in two moments of welfare restructuring in the United States. Many service providers and activists rework notions of obligation and responsibility to challenge the state to meet its obligations to its citizens. They enact an oppositional politics of obligation and care that is rooted in normative values rooted in family and faith. The paper concludes with a consideration of the potential for an oppositional politics of obligation.

Keywords: Responsibility, Obligation, Citizenship, Social Welfare, Activism

Praxis Abstract:

This article demonstrates the incompleteness of state-led efforts to shift responsibility for social welfare provision from governments to communities. It demonstrates the ways that oppositional politics can be waged in ways that may be quiet, but that disrupt efforts to forge a consensus around responsibility. Focusing on the acts and words of service providers and activists, it highlights efforts to oppose the retrenchment of welfare. It argues that critical scholarship and praxis should be receptive to the potential for radical politics motivated by faith and nourished in homes and families.

Chris describes himself as a ‘street case worker’ in Boulder, Colorado. He volunteers at a few organisations that provide services for people without homes, and has started yet others, including a project that organises homeless people to do community and charitable work. He describes his work as ‘hanging out with homeless people,’ checking on them, listening to them, and generally being a kind person to them. Formerly homeless himself, his own housing situation is far from stable. He lives with his partner, her son, her father, and a new baby girl. No one in the family has health insurance, and a few months before we talked, he was hit by a car and suffered a broken leg. Yet within a few days, Chris was back out on the street, checking on his community, being a friend and hanging out. He says that about five years before we met, God called him to leave his home and family and to find people who needed him. God did not feature prominently in the rest of our conversation, but responsibility did. He talked about our collective responsibility to take care of each other, to share, and to be kind. He is sceptical of government and programmes to assist poor people, dismissing the government as not being “in it for the right reason. They don’t have the right values.”

Chris embraces the idea that communities and the people who constitute them need to take care of each other, yet he rejects the *rationale* for changes to the welfare system and social safety net put forward by politicians and government officials that puts more responsibility on communities. He makes a complicated argument that the government’s modest level of provision for homeless people should not be justified by claims that it is the responsibility of communities and people to care for each other, and he believes that his actions should not be used to justify government’s the retrenchment of social welfare provision. He is willing to meet his responsibilities, but wants the government to do so, as well. There is, he believes, a shared responsibility to care for homeless people.

Over the past 20 years, I have interviewed several people like Chris. Their stories and work are often moving and inspiring. While the particulars vary, there is a common thread in the way they talk about obligation and commitment to people who struggle, who are marginalised, or who have been punished and discarded by society. Many of these activists use the language of responsibility and community with what almost seems to be

abandon. The terms run through their descriptions of what they do, why they do it, and their vision for the kinds of societies and social relationships they hope to build for the future.

In many respects, the language used by activists and service providers echo the language of many government officials and politicians, who also make arguments about responsibility and community. Governments across the countries of the global north have initiated programmes of devolution, retrenchment and dismantling of social welfare support. In these moves – as well as in the normative arguments put forward by many activists – communities and individuals are argued to hold a responsibility that compels them to be attuned to the welfare of others and to act accordingly. Many commentators and scholars argue that this feeling of responsibility means that communities will be efficacious sites for social welfare provision, as well as sites in which individuals can learn to be responsible, self-disciplined, and self-governing citizens (see Newman and Clarke 2009 and Schram et al 2010 for review and critique). Scholars who are critical of these moves describe them in terms of the ‘responsibilisation’ of citizenship, ‘neo-communitarianism’, and ‘governing through community’ (Ilcan and Basok 2004; Jessop 2002; Rose 1999). Many of these scholars have traced the ways in which a normative discourse about where responsibility for social welfare *should* be located has been used to justify state retrenchment from its provision.

In this article, I examine the ways that responsibility is framed in activist discourses. I begin with a brief consideration of the notions of obligation and responsibility as they relate to conceptualisations of citizenship, then move to the ways in which discourses associated with neo-liberal governance strategies subtly – but crucially – rework those notions. With this as a backdrop, interviews with social service providers and activists conducted at two moments of retrenchment of social welfare provision in the United States are used to understand how they describe the responsibilities of citizens, communities and the state with regard to welfare provision. While there is considerable overlap in the language used by activists, service providers and the government, the normative values that underpin that language diverge. This divergence is important, as it leads many activists to a political stance in opposition to the state and its programmes of retrenchment. From their perspective, investing greater responsibility in communities

does not – or perhaps *should* not – imply a diminution in governmental responsibilities. Their comments make clear that the critical issue is the way that obligation is understood and the divergent ways it is deployed and acted upon. Many oppositional activists laud the recognition of the responsibilities that individuals, families, and communities have in ensuring the welfare of citizens; they do not, however, necessarily believe that the government's obligations are concomitantly reduced. In making this argument and enacting a politics of moral opposition, a significant number of activists draw on normative values rooted in faith and family. I conclude with a consideration of the potential of these two sites and their implications for a politics of care and obligation.

Citizenship, Responsibility and Obligation

Liberal citizenship is often described as involving various bundles of rights that are available to all members of the political community; in the contexts of neo-liberalism and the accompanying privatisation and retrenchment of many aspects of social welfare provision, attention is directed to the implications for democracy, social rights, and a sense of solidarity amongst citizens (eg Brodie 2002; Cowen 2005; Hindess 2005). Yet liberal citizenship entails a bundle of responsibilities and obligations, in addition to a bundle of rights. Obligation is less frequently discussed than rights in the scholarly literature, and is typically the preserve of political philosophers (eg Dunn 1990; Hirschman 1992; Horton 1992). The obligations of liberal citizenship take many forms, but taxation, military service, and obeying the law are the most commonly identified. The invocation of these mundane aspects of obligation – which often seem to involve rote performance of required deeds – masks the moral and normative bases obligation, including the bonds that compel citizens to act in particular ways and from which they cannot exit. Brown (2006), however, has persuasively argued that attention to obligation is necessary for a balanced understanding of citizenship and of the public moralities that underpin it.

It may seem strange to say that obligation has not received much attention, because responsibility talk seems pervasive. These two terms – responsibility and obligation – are often used interchangeably in political debate and even in political philosophy, but it is important to draw a distinction between them. Obligation implies a bond, and even a duty, that cannot be abrogated. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines

obligation in terms of responsibility, but also as a “burden”, a “compulsion”, an “onus”, and a “liability”. Obligation can be put on a person by virtue of membership, with or without consent. Responsibility, however, does not carry such strong connotations, with the dictionary using terms such as “task”, “function”, “job”, “reliability”, and “dependability” to define it. It also lists “authority”, “control”, and “power”, terms that are shared with obligation. But the notion of compulsion, of a bond, is missing in the definition of responsibility. More than a matter of semantics, the term responsibility carries the possibilities of voluntarism and consent that are not part of obligation. Carole Pateman (1989), Nancy Hirschman (1992) and other feminists have noted the significance of this. The liberal-democratic state is built on an assumption of voluntarist consent on the part of citizens to give up some of their freedoms to be governed. Whether one thinks about this in terms of a social contract or implied consent or in terms of a rationalisation based on the utility of trading some rights to maximise individual well-being, the point is that liberal democratic theory assumes that citizens consent to be governed and, in consenting, voluntarily agree to their responsibilities. The voluntarism and consent upon which liberal theory is based can be used to justify the diminution of rights in certain circumstances, however, leading Hirschman (1996: 161) to argue that such voluntarism is “in reality camouflage for coercion.”

That camouflage is often provided through governing strategies that reinforce certain behaviours associated with responsibility and responsible citizenship. This is seen clearly with respect to groups seen as being in need of discipline. These groups include homeless people (Whiteford 2010), young people (Gaskell 2008), social welfare recipients (Ilcan and Basok 2004) or those involved in the criminal justice system (Gray 2005), but more subtle strategies operate, as well. These strategies train and/or encourage behaviours such that citizens internalise the norms necessary for the development of the self-governing citizen. Through state-led pedagogies of citizenship, individuals learn to accept and act on their responsibilities without obviously being forced, reminded, or even cajoled. Acting responsibly is thus internalised by ‘good’ citizens who apparently consent to those norms of behaviour, who will be amenable to calls for active citizenship, and who will volunteer to meet the needs of others in the community (Pykett et al 2010). From this

perspective, responsibility takes on an instrumental function that justifies a lessened role for the state in guaranteeing the social rights of citizenship.

Yet discourses of responsibility and obligation are also related to normative views about how citizens should relate to each other and about the meaning of democratic governing. As already noted, one set of norms operative in contemporary debates draws from the arguments about voluntarism and consent in liberal democracies. If liberal theory and liberal democracy are predicated on an idea of consent by autonomous individuals, then it follows that citizens must assume certain responsibilities as agreed through public debate and governance. Once decisions are reached through democratic processes, it is argued, citizens have a normative responsibility to act in accordance with them.

If, however, one moves away from the voluntarist position, other sources of obligation and other values may assume greater importance. Many feminist philosophers, for example, challenge the notion of the autonomous self of liberal theory (Rasmussen 2011), and instead locate individuals in webs of social relationships. Obligation, they argue, emerges from a sense of connection, rather than the voluntary consent of autonomous subjects (Hirschman 1996; Pateman 1989). From this stance, it is possible to imagine norms of care and mutuality as the basis of obligation (Held 2006; Jagger 2001). This is a stance taken by many feminist political theorists who have argued that an ethic of care and recognition of mutual obligation are crucial to the formation of citizenship and democratic societies (eg Tronto 2005; Held 2006; Sevenhuijsen 1998). From this perspective, care involves recognition of mutuality and a commitment to the self-development of all people, including those who may be unknown to an individual or who may spatially distant (Massey 2004; Robinson 2010; Smith 2000).

When states – a critical set of institutions entwined in relationships of political obligation – fail to act on those norms of care and mutuality, one might expect to see oppositional politics and mobilisations justified on the grounds that the state is failing to meet its obligations. Obligation in this instance would not be rooted in notions of consent or even in emotions and feelings of compassion, but rather in bonds of compulsion that the state is not morally justified in ignoring. Furthermore, obligation may compel individuals to ‘acts of citizenship’ in which agents break with the status quo to challenge political,

economic, or social structures (Isin 2008). Oppositional politics in this way are about the fundamental issue of obligation, its source, and its moral bases (see Rose 2000).

As White (2001) demonstrates, the fundamental obligation of citizenship and citizens to care is turned on its head in policies associated with neo-liberalism and in the changes to welfare policies in the United States. Rather than care reflecting an obligation to *one another* to foster well-being and self-development, care becomes a responsibility to care for *oneself*, such that one does not place a burden on others. Reactions to this – and normative values regarding obligation and care – underpin at least some of the political organising and action in response to calls for citizens to be responsible and the changes in social welfare provision. It is not a politics to which labels of ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘progressive’, or ‘conservative’ can be easily attached. Rather, commitments to care embed the same agonism regarding responsibility and obligation as do other political stances. At least for some activists, it is a politics of direct action, expressing both an obligation to care for others and to oppose what they believe are the uncaring acts of governments and individuals.

The political philosopher John Horton (1992: 13) argues that tracing normative debates such as this may be particularly instructive in times of turmoil and dislocation, because obligation expresses the moral and ethical relationships between individuals, the political community, and the state. In times of change and disruption, the legitimacy of actions – on the part of the state and on the part of oppositional activists – is often called into question. “In particular,” he argues, people “may come to ask what legitimate claims the political community has on us; what we owe it; and how both these matters are to be determined” (p. 2). These relationships not only bind us together, but also help to create a shared understanding of what we see, how we understand it, and thereby how we frame problems and solutions. The norms that underlie obligation, however, are not static or fully formed, but instead are reviewed and modified in light of what Olson and Sayer (2009) term “anomalous evidence.” Sometimes this occurs when norms of obligation seem not to provide a good basis for linking individuals, the political community, and the state. Sometimes the evidence suggests that particular agents in those relationships are not fulfilling their obligations. Sometimes the evidence suggests that norms of obligation are understood differently by different agents. In the context of retrenchment, and what many

see as the state's failure to meet its obligations, the perception of anomalous evidence may call into question the legitimacy of state actions and may provide the basis for contestation and political mobilisation *as citizens*.

Attention to obligation, therefore, requires that we understand citizenship as a normative construct in addition to an identity, an experience, or a legal standing. More specifically, analyses of citizenship need to incorporate the morals and values that bind people in a political community, whether they want to be included or not, the kinds of actions that morals and values compel, and the ways that social norms may be seen as legitimating the marginalisation of people or social groups within political communities, even as they are incorporated in the community in other ways. Incorporating these considerations enables a deeper understanding of how people act on their responsibilities and sometimes feel obliged to challenge the state. The shared rhetoric of responsibility and obligation evident in Chris' description of why he is involved with homeless people and in the government's policies on housing provision does not mean that Chris and the government share a common normative base. For people like Chris, beliefs and normative values compel a politics of direct action, expressing both an obligation to care for others and to oppose what they may believe are the uncaring acts of governments and individuals.

The Politics of Welfare and Responsibility

What is it that Chris and others challenge in government policy? Welfare policy has always been a contentious issue in the US, and a number of histories have been written about it (eg Gordon 1994; Peck 2001). Beginning in the 1990s, momentum gathered for a drastic overhaul of entitlement programmes that was part of a broader debate about the role of government in families, communities, and economies. This debate was most evident in the 1994 Contract with America, organised by Newt Gingrich during the 1994 Congressional elections. The Contract set out the legislation that a Republican House of Representatives would pass in the first 100 days it was in session. High on the list of changes was a commitment to 'devolution', whereby states and localities assumed a larger role in making decisions about the type of social services to be delivered. The expectation

was that this would shrink the size of the federal government, make the delivery of services more cost-effective, and allow the local governments and non-profit agencies to innovate and to respond to the specific needs of their communities. Devolution, however, was only one aspect of the new framework for social welfare provision, as the legislation also involved the privatisation of service delivery and the dismantling of many programs (Kodras 1997). Taken as a whole, the Contract promised that the changes would make it possible for individuals and communities to assume responsibility for addressing the needs of poor and marginalised people. The 1996 welfare bill in the United States, for instance, carries the formal title “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” (PRWORA). In this framing, responsibility for well-being is personal and perhaps communal, but not the US government’s, and is certainly not a social right of citizenship. The proper role of the government, advocates argued, was to enable and empower people to assume those responsibilities.

Some 15 years later, in the wake of the financial crisis and in the midst of crippling unemployment, these debates were taken up again in the US. In the summer of 2011, the US government was almost shut down as debate raged over the proper size, scope and responsibilities of the federal government, vis-à-vis states, corporations and individuals. Once again, social welfare systems featured prominently as some politicians, pundits, and parties argued that the size of the budget and the deficit was putting a crippling burden on the abilities of individuals to provide for their own well-being and to live as truly free citizens. Even more so than the debate in the mid-1990s, heated claims were made about other people ‘freeloading’ and placing a burden on the people who were already doing the ‘right’ things by working hard and taking care of their own families. This discourse was perhaps most prominent in the Tea Party movement, but resonated with a broad range of people who felt threatened by irresponsible behaviour by banks, mortgage lenders, and those who took out mortgages they could not realistically afford. The Tea Party framed irresponsibility as a limiting the rights and freedoms of people who were behaving responsibly.

Often overlooked in both debates was a close analysis of the powers that the government retained – and in some ways expanded – in the name of devolution. Many of these were powers to force particular forms of responsibility and to discipline those who

would behave irresponsibly. The five year limit on welfare support imposed through the PRWORA, for instance, and the requirement that people be involved in either work or training in order to receive assistance were both attempts to force state governments that were felt to be overly generous benefits to be firmer in their treatment of welfare recipients. Similarly, efforts to reduce benefits to unmarried couples were an attempt to force low-income households to conform to norms and expectations of family life. Each of these changes gave the federal government increased powers to regulate welfare and behaviors, and reversed the Reagan administration's decision to allow states greater flexibility in service provision to meet local needs; these powers reverted to the central government, somehow in the name of 'devolution' (Cope 1997). No accidental contradiction, the design of the new welfare rules represented an intentional effort to use the powers of the federal government to force certain behaviours. As Newt Gingrich commented in a 1992 speech to the National Association of Public Administration, the Reagan administration made a mistake in not understanding exactly how government could be used to force change. "The Reagan failure," he argued, "was to grossly undervalue the centrality of government as the organizing mechanism for reinforcing societal behavior" (Markon 2012). More than just a passing comment about a specific US president, Gingrich simultaneously recognised the pedagogical role of the government and provided the rationale for a reform to the system that shifted responsibility, but not authority or power, away from the state to institutions and individuals within local communities and civil society. This, according to Jones et al (2011: 483) is "the defining characteristic of economic, cultural, and political power."

Some portion of the political rationale for this change in provision comes from the economist James Buchanan (1975) and his analysis of the Samaritan's Dilemma. The term comes from the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Christian Bible, wherein a stranger goes out of his way to help a person in need. Buchannan argues that while this was a laudable act of charity and altruism, we can easily go too far and 'help' people into dependency. In making this argument, Buchannan draws on more than just an example from the Bible; it is also a set of values related to autonomy, responsibility to self and others, and charity that he grounds in Christian morality. It is a linkage that is frequently made, and frequently contested. It is little coincidence, for instance, that the Office of

Faith Based Initiatives and Neighborhood Partnerships in George W. Bush's administration was promoted as a cornerstone of his 'compassionate conservatism.' The very name of the Office links faith to locality, and was promoted as a way of being both responsive to need and reflective of the moral values of community in a way that the federal government never could be. A growing literature focuses on this linkage between moral values associated with faith (and not just Christian faith, but also Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism) and the ability to respond to need through organisations at the local level. Davies (2012), for instance, traces the ways that Thatcherism is grounded in a particular Christian rationality, and other authors have pointed to the ways that faith based values have been enrolled in government policies of localism (eg Conradson 2008; May et al 2005). It is a linkage that many people working in social service organisation applaud. A volunteer at a church in Denver that provided food, clothing and housing to poor people, for example, made the case:

"We could ask for more government. We *could* ask for more government. We could ask for them to take more taxes so that they could set up shelters, they could feed the homeless and the working poor. We could enlarge the welfare system. We could take individuals with good hearts out of the picture and we could just enlarge the government... But whereas if we have the government take care of the minimum amount of things that they do need to take care of, and if churches and communities are willing to step up and close the gap and meet them there, then they [the government] don't have to do the other things. Because we are there to feed the people, to feed God's people, and to clothe them and to house them" (interview, Denver, 22/6/2010)ⁱ.

These arguments about who bears the responsibility for helping others is important; they are moral arguments that are poorly represented in the academic literature on the 'responsibilization' of citizens. This literature often fails to account for the ways that many community organisations and activists *want* to assume more responsibility, believing that the state *is* too far removed and unresponsive. The welfare rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, for instance, were provoked in part by the belief that street level bureaucrats were interfering and disciplining, without listening to the

claims of poor citizens or responding to their legitimate demands (Fainstein 2010; Lipsky 1980). Those movements strove to vest responsibility in community organisations and organisations of poor people as a means of empowering them.

Responsibility talk is, thus, not the exclusive preserve of conservatives or of states wishing to divest themselves of responsibility for the welfare of their citizens. Instead, discourses of responsibility are complex and multi-stranded. They sometimes converge in the language used, but diverge in the meaning given to responsibility. And the moral bases of responsibility and who should assume it are not always evident in sound bites or quick passages of text. Yet it is in the convergence and divergence in discourses of responsibility that its politics can be seen, interpreted, and acted upon. The remainder of the article explores these politics through interviews with social service providers and community activists in the US over a 15-year period.

Methods

The analysis that follows draws from two separate research projects. The first was focused directly on citizenship, activism and social service provision in the context of state restructuring and the Contract with America. For this project, 61 interviews were conducted in 1994-1996 in the cities of Tacoma and Spokane, Washington and Colorado Springs, Coloradoⁱⁱ. The second project is about public life, and includes 55 interviews with people involved in housing provision, policing, food provision for poor people, and community activism in the Denver region and the East Bay region, or generally Berkeley and Oaklandⁱⁱⁱ. While the projects are different, people engaged in similar roles were interviewed and similar questions are included in the interview schedules. All respondents were asked about what they hoped to achieve through their work, and how and why they became involved as activists or as social service providers. Neither project asked directly about responsibility, but respondents often raised the issue.

Transcripts of the interviews were examined to identify whether and how respondents talked about responsibility. As it happens, many people did not use the term at all, and so they were not considered further in the analysis. By contrast, some people invoked many different senses of responsibility in their answers. Often, they critiqued a

definition by saying that, while some people define responsibility one way, they use a different definition. Each definition mentioned by respondents was coded, as was an indication of whether they supported or were critical of those definitions. Very often, respondents used terms that might be considered to be synonyms for responsibility, such as accountability. But if a respondent talked about accountability without using the term responsibility, I have not included it in this part of the analysis. This is a rather conservative analysis strategy, as it is likely to underestimate the extent to which respondents talked about responsibility. While tallies of responses are reported, there is no intention to suggest that the responses are somehow ‘representative’ of all activists. The analysis is, however, indicative of the ways respondents thought about responsibility and the role of the state.

Interviews were also examined in light of the political agenda the respondents promoted. In particular, I was interested in those respondents and organisations that were involved in ‘oppositional politics’ in which respondents described their work as either being in direct, overt opposition to the government and mainstream politics or as engaging a set of actions that challenge the state’s normative assumptions about responsibility for well-being and the relationships between individuals, communities and the state. This latter form of oppositional politics is a form of witness or address through action. Such means of waging politics are common in moral protests, particularly amongst those who, by virtue of their social positioning, lack the power attendant on institutional roles or social position (see Pratt 2009; Wright 2009).

There are always limits in what can be learned through a comparison of interviews from two studies that had rather different goals and that were conducted 15 years apart in different places. The focus, however, is on the ways that activists at two moments of debate over social welfare provision discuss the issues and the values that motivate their engagement. As will be demonstrated, responsibility and obligation feature prominently for many of the respondents. Yet there are few differences in the two sets of interviews that seem to reflect a changing moral climate of obligation and responsibility. Instead, what stands out is an enduring oppositional politics of responsibility based in mutuality and drawing from family and faith.

Discourses of Responsibility

Probably the first thing to note when talking about the discourses of responsibility is that nearly one-third of the respondents did not use the term at all (Table 1). This absence was most common in interviews where the respondent generally was not very forthcoming, but also in interviews with large voluntary and civil society organisations that had chapters in multiple cities. Many were under-written by fund-raising and philanthropic organisations that form the so-called “non-profit industrial complex” (Smith 2007). To some extent, the tightly focused answers the respondents offered may simply reflect the more technocratic approach that many of these organisations take or the reticence of respondents to insert their personal opinions and politics while speaking in their role as a representative of the organisation.

----- insert Table 1 -----

Contested Meanings of Responsibility

Amongst those respondents who did mention responsibility, the term was defined in a variety of ways. A relatively large share of respondents in the 1994-6 study provided definitions of responsibility in terms of accountability and self-sufficiency, saying, for instance that individuals needed to be taught budgeting skills to ensure they could pay rent and be held accountable for their behaviour. Such a definition seems compatible with the responsibilisation practices that have been discussed in the literature. People raising such definitions, however, were not necessarily supporters of welfare retrenchment. Instead, many people talked about responsibility and self-sufficiency in terms of empowerment. One woman, for example, argued women had to assume responsibility to be self-sufficient if they were to throw off the shackles of the patriarchal state and the institution of marriage. For her, “Self-sufficiency is fulfilment. It sets you free” (interview, Spokane, 15 August 1995). Commitments to an almost radical feminism undergirded her activism, suggesting that responsibility talk is not the preserve of conservative activists or politicians.

A second set of definitions of responsibility were statutory or institutional in some way, as respondents talked about the legal and fiduciary responsibility of government agencies and of individuals working in government or government-supported programs.

Most of these respondents worked either in government agencies or were in the sort of third sector organisations that state restructuring depends on to pick up the burden of reduced government funding. As such, some respondents talked about responsibility in terms of the division of labour between city government and non-profit service providers as they worked with poor people. Not surprisingly, perhaps, a number of respondents also talked about the responsibility of the agency/organisation to ensure that clients or beneficiaries of services also took some responsibility for their situation. While this might seem to indicate shared or mutual responsibility, it is probably more accurate to say that it was a partitioned responsibility with the ability to enforce the partition resting squarely with institutions. For example, groups working with homeless or marginally housed families often taught budgeting skills, skills for dealing with landlords, and provided counselling for drug or alcohol dependency. If individuals did not attend these sessions, they could lose eligibility for other services because they were not behaving responsibly. Few of these organisations or respondents actively challenged the government, and many seemed happy enough to expand their offerings, as long as funding was available. They willingly embraced the responsibility of their organisations to help individuals act responsibly.

Chris, the street case worker in Boulder, is a possible exception, because he talked about teaching people skills so that they could be self-sufficient, yet he did not necessarily want to change their behaviors. He meets homeless people as a friend, rather than a disciplinarian or regulator. One example is man who had a severe head injury several years ago, which caused him to lose his job and his housing. He is prone to seizures if he does not take his medicine, but remembering to do so was difficult for him, living as he did in parks around the city. A seizure usually resulted in a trip to the hospital emergency room, costing the City of Boulder about \$60,000 per episode. Chris was working with the man to develop some reminders to take his medicines, but Chris also visited the man every day just to be sure. And every so often, he asks the City to take some of the money that they saved because of his actions and divert it to a warming center for homeless people. It never happens, but he continues to remind the City of its responsibilities. His banter with city officials serves to remind them that they also have responsibilities that emanate from their institutional roles.

Respondents who might be considered to take a more activist stance often pointed to the responsibilities of the government and public. Sometimes the issue was raised in conjunction with a request for more money, but more profound and direct challenges were also launched. Often, these challenges involved a combination of witness, protest, and legal action. One woman in Denver, for instance, talked about the statutory responsibilities of the police to enforce the law, but also to ensure their behavior both followed the law and was sensitive to the history of racialised repression and policing in the city. She argued that it was *irresponsible* to ignore racial dynamics, and that the irresponsibility was compounded when the authority of the state was in play:

“There are no absolutes, other than people shouldn’t use violence. And particularly people shouldn’t use violence when they have the authority of the state behind them. They have a greater responsibility to protecting civil liberties, and therefore have greater accountability” (interview, Denver, 18 June, 2010).

She was part of an organisation that organised vigils at sites where people of color had suffered abuse at the hands of the police, attended – and sometimes disrupted – meetings of the police oversight committee, and also supported several civil rights law suits against the City. These actions are grounded in responsibility talk, but it pushes responsibility back to the police and the state; in a sense, she wants to ‘responsibilize’ the state. This woman does not condone violence on anyone’s part, and she is well aware of the problems that affect low-income communities of color in Denver; many of those problems, she notes, are self-induced, and people need to own up to that. But accepting that responsibility does not absolve the police or the government for their *additional* responsibilities in the context of Denver’s past and present of racialized policing. It is not enough to recognise that history, she argues. The police have a responsibility to act in particular ways because of it.

A final set of definitions of responsibility draw on notions of mutuality, care, and moral commitments; almost all of the respondents who talked about responsibility in this way also talked about responsibility as being communal or collective. For instance, a woman in Spokane ran a crisis nursery, a resource for (usually) single parents who simply needed a respite from the burdens of taking care of a child. Some members of the City Council criticized the nursery as facilitating irresponsible behaviour; they noted that

demand on the nursery was greatest on Friday and Saturday and made the case that this was just a glorified babysitting service for single – and usually young and low income – mothers. She rebuffed the claim:

“I don’t think anybody, and I don’t care who you are, can have sole care and responsibility of a child 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You cannot deal with it. I raised four kids and I never had sole responsibility for them 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And whether you have a partner or whether you have a mother or a neighbor or an aunt or a sister or I don’t care who it is, you have got to have somebody that can support you.”

She became very agitated at a City Council member who made a comment that the nursery should not be expanded to meet the demand on Friday and Saturday:

“I basically told one of the gentlemen who was sitting there saying, ‘Well, you see, I’m not sure we can do this,’ and I said, ‘Gary, I’ll call you at 8:00 next Friday night and you make the decision not to admit that little baby.’ I said, ‘And then you go home and you try to go to sleep at night’” (interview, Spokane, 17 August, 1995).

In so doing, she turned the state-led responsibility argument on its head, arguing there was a need for support that should be provided with state assistance and funding. Those officials who refused to acknowledge – and provide funds for – that support should, themselves, take individual responsibility for the consequences. But as she later noted, such would never happen, not least because a child might die because City Council members did not have the links into the community to help families in a moment of crisis.

Efforts to force the state to meet its responsibility to care for its citizens frequently involve some peril to activists. One man who ran a community center in Colorado Springs, for instance, often found himself on the wrong side of the law and of government decision-making. He helped organise a racially diverse, but low income neighbourhood, and was creative in writing grants and gaining donations to support a medical center, legal center, employment center, feeding program, and space to socialize. A condition of most of the grants and donations was that the programs and services were not to be political. He scoffed at that restriction and used the facility to organise the community and to stage actions of various sorts. He also organized teams of people to raid neighbourhoods that

had been the beneficiaries of city tree-planting and landscaping efforts, noting that the city never seemed to send any of those things his neighborhood's way. Periodically, these trees would be 'liberated' from wealthy areas and be replanted in poor neighborhoods. He justified this in terms of the 'plantation system' that operated in the city, whereby the white neighborhoods got the best of everything and neighborhoods with low-incomes and many people of color got the scraps. While he 'helped' the city meet its responsibilities to a broader range of neighbourhoods, he insisted it was because people have a duty to take care of each other, to look out for each other, and to be sure people have what they need to survive, and even flourish. He was, however, a convicted felon who could be imprisoned for his actions, which included theft of government property.

These examples of responsibility framed in terms of care and mutuality are perhaps not typical. They demonstrate, however, commitments to mutuality and communal responsibility, but also that care is not necessarily a soft politics and is not based on bonds of familiarity. It is a discourse of responsibility that *sounds* a lot like state discourses of community and responsibility. But enacting a politics of caring responsibility involves tough fights in city council meetings, sometimes involves extra-legal activities, and puts people in some jeopardy. It is not as soft-edged as the terms 'care' and 'moral commitment' may imply.

Locating Oppositional Politics

Not surprisingly, a number of the respondents and/or the organisations they represented were engaged in an oppositional politics in one way or another that posed a fundamental challenge to the state and communities that involved more than working for reform or lobbying the government. Approximately 20% of the respondents indicated they engaged in what I am calling 'oppositional politics', or politics that involved efforts to create to radical change in socio-eco-political structures^{iv}. There are two very different expressions of such oppositional politics: one involves challenges to the state in direct ways, forcing the state to be accountable and to fulfil its obligations; the other involves a challenge that is perhaps subtle, but that is a challenge through visible actions that promote moral commitments and values in ways that almost shame the government and fellow citizens.

In both forms of oppositional politics, activists challenge the state and society to live up to their obligations. Unlike the respondents, I use the term obligation, rather than responsibility, because all of these respondents made an argument that the government cannot legitimately shed its responsibility; this illegitimacy is a key feature of obligation that distinguishes it from responsibility. Furthermore, when activists talked about their own commitments, none of them talked in terms of voluntarism or consent. They talked instead about being compelled to act, which is a feature of obligation.

When oppositional activists talked about responsibility/obligation, they did so in ways that involved complex definitions of responsibility and about *who* held *what form* of responsibility. Each column in Table 2 is a definition of responsibility, and each row is dedicated to an interview in which an activist talked about it. A ‘1’ in a cell indicates that an individual respondent mentioned a particular form of responsibility^v. Several issues are notable. The first is the frequency with which respondents mentioned mutuality and a responsibility to care, with 10 of the 18 respondents mentioning this. Given the difficulty of reaching consensus amongst activists, this is significant.

----- insert Table 2 -----

Second, there is nuance in the ways in which people talked about responsibility, recognising its multi-faceted nature. When people talked about responsibility as stemming from mutuality, relations of care, and moral commitment, they also invoked a *communal* responsibility for the well-being of people in the community. By contrast, when they talked about accountability, statutory obligations, and institutional roles, they generally talked about government agencies, and the need for the government to be held accountable. Every one of the respondents who talked about statutory requirements and institutional roles indicted the state in one way or another. The comments behind each one of those definitions were as follows: “the government has to deal with this”; “we need to push the government to address these issues”; “the government has abrogated its responsibilities”; “the state must follow its legal obligations”; “we have to hold the state to account”; “individuals must hold the state to account”; “the government must follow the rules it established”; “we need to force the state to follow the law;” “the government needs to obey the law.” In aggregate, it is a powerful condemnation of the way they believe the state fails to meet its obligations.

Third, it may be telling that respondents in the first set of interviews (in 1994-1996) talked more about self-sufficiency as a good outcome than did people in the second set of interviews. Whether this reflects the economic crisis that made self-sufficiency an impossible goal, whether it reflects a growing feeling that the state is abrogating its responsibilities, or whether it is an artefact of combining a small number of cases from different studies is unclear.

Equally important as the complex definitions and the locations of responsibility are the sources, inspirations, and moral bases for responsibility activists mentioned. Many traced their views and their activism to family and to their faith or spirituality (Table 3). This was particularly evident amongst people of colour and groups representing racialised minorities; all of them talked about either family or faith in shaping their politics and the work they do.

----- insert Table 3 -----

It is perhaps not surprising that people who make claims about moral responsibilities to care and to other people might trace the origin of their moral values to such sources, since families and faith are important sites for the production and reproduction of values. When asked why she became involved in social activism, an 85-year-old woman simply replied, “Why, Mother told me to” (interview, Spokane, 30 August, 1995). Many people were the son or the daughter of activists, and learned the importance of opposition through their parents. One such woman attributed her activism to her mother’s admonition: “Mama told me, ‘You got to go out and take what you need.’” But she also said, ‘You got to make them know what you need’” (interview, 24 August, 2010).

Other respondents talked about faith and spirituality in their activism. People running food lines and soup kitchens often tell stories of God opening opportunities for them to do the work they do and talk about the blessings they receive through that work. One such person was a former Catholic priest, who says he left the Church, but not his faith. But it is a particular kind of faith and spirituality that is not observed by sitting in a church; rather, it is enacted, and often enacted in publicly-accessible spaces where the actions would be *seen*. There is a slogan amongst socially activist congregations: What if ‘church’ were a verb? The question compels people to not just receive their faith and their

blessings, but to act on their faith. For these people, the best way to announce the word of God – and to challenge the state – is through actions, not proselytism. Feeding programmes in parks were described by some as a statement that the poor should not be swept away, hidden from view. To do so would make it too easy for both the state and the community to overlook their responsibilities.

Family and faith are often viewed with some suspicion by scholars on the Left, as the values associated with them are often seen as being *traditional* values, and so might be seen as consistent with the kind of social conservatism of the religious right. The oppositional activists represented here, however, felt that their family and faith offered a model of community and society that stood in contrast to models promoted in many government policies and the self-absorbed greed of contemporary life. Activists were trying to build communities – or even just a space for community – in which values of responsibility to each other were central and in which it was not possible to exclude people because they were a bit scary or made other people uncomfortable. These respondents argued that the state was not meeting its responsibilities, but that it *should*. When they argued that the state could not legitimately shirk its responsibilities, they made an argument about obligation, but an obligation that was bidirectional. The organisations and individuals discussed here are obviously only a subset of the population of service providers in the cities where these interviews were conducted. Yet they provide a powerful witness to the values that they believe underpin the obligations of individuals, communities, and the state. Voluntarism or consent – the basis of responsibility – is not the issue for these activists; moral values and commitments that obligate people and the state to care for each other are.

Conclusions

What does it mean when progressive, and even radical activists incorporate responsibility talk in their work? It is after all, talk that sounds remarkably like the state-led discourses of responsabilization that justifies a retreat from social welfare provision. The prevalence of responsibility talk is perhaps not surprising, because there is a way that all agents involved are working toward goals that are in some ways similar: helping – and

sometimes forcing – relevant individuals and institutions meet their obligations. But three important issues emerge from the comments and experiences of the activists.

First, the comments of these respondents – whether oppositional or not – point to the incompleteness of state-led responsibilisation. Critics of state-led efforts could usefully expand their analyses beyond the state, shadow state, and the non-profit industrial complex, because there are other values, other meanings, and other politics of responsibility and obligation at work in our cities and communities. Through their actions, some activists and service providers pose a powerful challenge to retrenchment and a retreat from social welfare. They make – and fight for – the case that the state is not morally justified in shirking its obligations. While these people use the language of responsibility, the notion of obligation more precisely describes their motivation. Obligation implies a bond from which people, agencies and socio-political institutions cannot exit. The oppositional activists highlighted in the latter part of the analysis argue that the state cannot voluntarily leave that bond of mutuality. Lacking the institutional authority of the state, they often rely on forms of witness that are to some degree intended to shame the state. Of course, shaming is not their only goal; these activists also enact a politics of mutuality, care, and commitment rooted in communal obligations.

Second, understanding the moral bases of commitment requires that scholars take seriously family and faith as sources of activism. We often recognise the importance of norms and values in activist and resistance movements, but we also need to understand where these norms are located, where they are learned, and where they are activated. Feminists have long pointed to the importance of family as sites of social reproduction; this includes the reproduction of values associated with care and mutuality, as well as commitments to act on those values. Faith as a source of activism, however, has often been overlooked or viewed with some suspicion. Despite that broader scepticism, there is a growing body of research that points to the importance of faith in contentious and even radical politics (eg Beaumont 2008; Jamoul and Wills 2008; Kong 2010). The experiences of activists reported in this paper affirm the importance of faith and family in oppositional politics, and challenge scholars to more fully explore their significance in movements to transform the politics of obligation.

Finally, in undertaking such explorations, we should avoid pre-judging the political stance taken by activists. The politics of care is not unified, in the sense of activists understanding care in the same ways. Furthermore, acting on the politics of care often involves conflict and dissent. The activists who tried to force the state to meet its obligations were not interested in consensus; they were fighting for social transformation, but their visions of what transformation entailed differed. Many of them believe they are involved in actions that deepen democracy and justice in the places they live, and they do so by challenging the state. In pursuing politics of care and obligation, many activists also pursue an insurgent politics they hope will unsettle the status quo. In answering the question “whose responsibility is it?”, they hope to disrupt the politics of responsibility talk and force the recognition of a public responsibility. Extending the comments from the activist in Denver, Mama may have told some of the activists to engage in politics, but it is a politics that insists on a public responsibility – and obligation – from which we cannot disengage.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For the remainder of this paper, respondents are not identified by name. Chris is identified because he waived his right to confidentiality and because he is featured in a documentary made as part of the research project “Democracy and Public Life in the US and UK.”

ⁱⁱ Interviews were conducted by Susan Clarke, Christina Pykonnen and myself.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interviews were conducted by Don Mitchell, Kafui Attah and myself. This paper draws only from the US portion of the project.

^{iv} I am basing this assessment on what respondents said in the interview. Some respondents may well engage in activism, but did not speak about it.

^v There were seven respondents engaged in oppositional politics who did not talk about responsibility.